

While I was translating Marina Tsvetaeva's 1927 verse-drama *Phaedra*, and three long poems of hers to go in the same book, I found myself reflecting that very often, when translating poetry, especially if it is difficult, I feel a pleasure which is not like any other and which outsurges all the surgings of despair.

Trying to describe this, I thought of invoking the main complex of images in Tsvetaeva's "Attempt at a Room" ("Попытка комнаты"), the third of those three long poems. The focal point of this strange, uncomfortable work is the building of a walled space, a room, in which its own poet may somehow meet another poet who is loved but far away. The narrative of construction that links the poem's nine sections is repeatedly interrupted by digressions; nonetheless three walls, a ceiling and a floor become established.

At the end they break down:

Was it because the walls were gone –  
undeniably the ceiling leaned

down and only the vocative case  
flowered in mouths. Floor – undeniable

gap. Through the gap, green as the Nile,  
ceiling undeniably floated.

However, although the attempted room has not lasted, all 212 lines of the strenuously constructed poem about it remain – as it were – standing! This could suggest that the poem itself is the projected room and that the meeting of the two poets has taken place in it, if only as one of "touch-me-nots" and "tips, ends, the ends of hands". A poem as a meeting-place?

I think the feeling in that fragile encounter is the pleasure also felt by translators in our best moments of translating unusually challenging poetry. Here, too, there can be a sensation of quasi-meeting a distant, loved poet – the implicit author of the foreign work – this time in the carefully constructed "room" of our translation, which indeed stays soberly standing there after we have left.

This elusive experience does not seem to me either metaphysical or sentimental.